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Reflections on the Emergence and Evolution of a Scholarship of Teaching and Learning Community of Practice Within a Research-Intensive Higher Education Context

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Abstract

In this chapter we present a critical case study analysing the emergence and evolution of a higher education community of practice (CoP) centred on the Scholarship of Teaching and Learning (SoTL). This CoP exists in the context of an institution attempting to re-position itself as 'research intensive', where there are ongoing tensions between research and teaching, with prevailing perceptions that research is more valued than teaching, and disciplinary research is more valued than teaching and learning research. The chapter draws on the findings from a workshop with the CoP members, conducted within a Futures Studies anticipatory action-learning framework, and analysed using Causal Layered Analysis. Findings highlighted the importance of social context. Three themes emerging from the workshop were members' perceived systemic exclusion from the wider research community, exploration and contestation of dominant university culture and values, and perceptions that teaching and SoTL are undervalued within the university setting. Individual and collective experiences of exclusion and othering prompted a movement of defiance, fostering the development of a CoP which, over the first three years of operation, has achieved institutional recognition, access to resources, competitive research funding success, significant publication outputs, and, growth and stability in research group membership. Multidisciplinary engagement and focus, the research group's interpersonal style which is based on mutual respect and support, and flexibility through empathy have fostered successes. Ultimately the success of a CoP is not determined by tangible outputs alone. Rather, it is characterised by equity, collaboration, genuine participation and empowerment.

Keywords: SoTL; Scholarship of Teaching and Learning; Futures Studies; Causal Layered Analysis

Introduction

In August 2012, as part of a faculty-wide exercise to promote collaborative research, all academic staff members in our school (situated in a mid-sized, mid-ranked Australian university) were assigned to a 'program of research' by the head of school, based on their research history and interests. All but one of these programs represented an area of research strength for the school. The remaining program of research, seemingly pulled together to 'capture' staff not involved in areas of research strength for the school, was labelled 'teaching approaches/internet use'. This was the only program of research to have a Scholarship of Teaching and Learning (SoTL) focus. Two co-leaders and four other members were initially assigned to this group, representing a mix of predominantly teaching/research and teaching academics. Within this original small group there were varying degrees of engagement and association with the domain of research. Indeed, some members had not conducted any research in the areas of teaching or online behaviour previously. The group had no representation on the school's research committee.

The dynamic of the research group is perhaps best described as atypical of other research groups that developed from this process. SoTL emerged as the common theme amidst a group of individuals whose research interests were deemed to not fit anywhere else. During the group's establishment, there was seemingly limited institutional investment by the school or faculty, and the resultant dynamic was, in effect, due to members being left to their own devices. Members created and negotiated their own roles, rules, and focus. While this may have been the objective and process that emerged in other discipline specific research groups, this emerged with seemingly little scrutiny or interest by those in positions of power. In effect, a sense of being 'the forgotten', 'the disregarded', and the 'the undervalued' led to a scenario where the research group

began to manifest as a CoP. Its members with diverse disciplinary backgrounds, years of expertise, and levels of authority within the university structure found solace as institutional misfits, and common ground in their shared interest in SoTL.

Conceptually, it appears that while the group was formed alongside other research groups, the discipline non-specific focus of SoTL perhaps in part accounts for the way in which the group has, at times, been institutionally forgotten or disregarded as a research group. This dynamic may have contributed to the necessity of the group members to operate like a CoP. The dynamics of a CoP has been conducive to the development of an inclusive culture, seemingly in part a response to the exclusion from other groups felt by members.

From this inauspicious beginning just over three years ago, a thriving community of practice (CoP) has emerged. Our CoP is consistent with Wenger's (2010) model of Community of Practice, with CoP as a social learning system situated within broader social learning systems (Wenger, 2000, 2010). This CoP has a 'bootlegged' relationship (Wenger, McDermott, & Snyder, 2002) with the school within which it is embedded, with a history of fighting for recognition, resources and legitimacy. Over time, the success of this CoP has resulted in increased visibility and recognition within the broader faculty teaching and learning community, providing a form of legitimization. In this chapter, we (five members of the CoP) present a critical case study analysing the emergence, evolution and future directions of this higher education CoP, which has become increasingly (although not exclusively) centred on SoTL. We trace the organic growth of the CoP, from a small group of 'Odd Bods'[1] pushed together as part of a bureaucratic re-shaping exercise to a thriving CoP with 17 members today. In doing so, we capture a shared history of the CoP through providing the perspectives

[1] Our original colloquial name for the group.

of the leaders, original members, and newer members. We then articulate the challenges and tensions of conducting research in an area marginalised within higher education, and highlight the advocacy by members to legitimise the CoP as a research group in order to access resources and esteem.

Background

At the time of the initial assignments to programs of research, the university's vision was to be among the top 20 universities in Asia by 2020, with a particular focus on increasing the quantity and quality of research outputs. With its origins as an 'institute of technology', only transitioning to university status in the late 1980s, the university was now competing directly in a market with sandstone universities with established research credentials. As an institution attempting to re-position itself as 'research intensive', there were (and continue to be) ongoing tensions between research and teaching, with prevailing perceptions that research is more valued than teaching, and that disciplinary research is more valued than teaching and learning research. These attitudes are not specific to our institution, but are widespread throughout Australian (Freudenberg, 2012; Probert, 2013) and overseas (Schroeder, 2007) universities.

Across the Australian higher education sector, there is also increasing division between research and teaching staff, with increasing numbers of staff employed as 'teaching only' academics over the last five years (Probert, 2013, 2014). Consistent with this, a major restructuring within our own institution over the last two years has seen the emergence of new categories of academic staff: Teaching-Focussed, Teaching-Focussed Clinical-Professional, and Scholarly Teaching Fellow. With no formal time allocation for research, academics in these positions need to establish a record of engagement in SoTL in order to meet criteria for promotion. Engagement in SoTL is now "an imperative, not a choice" (Huber & Hutchings, 2005, cited in Mathison, 2015,

p. 98). It is also becoming increasingly imperative for staff with traditional teaching/research roles, with SoTL now a common criterion for performance management (Mathison, 2015; Vardi, 2011; Vardi & Quinn, 2011). Despite this, academic staff have not traditionally been trained in the area of SoTL. Although PhDs provide disciplinary training, the methodologies used within disciplines are not always transferable to SoTL research (Mathison, 2015; see, for example, Borrego 2007, on difficulties engineering academics experience in transitioning to SoTL). This places academic staff occupying teaching roles in a difficult transition, where they must focus their career progression on SoTL, despite this being a new and unique domain to many, and quite often distinct from their path to, and progression through, academia to date.

This context causes further tension for staff members wishing to continue pursuing research specific to their discipline and area of interest/specialty when this lies outside of SoTL. Without being recognised within workloads or career progression frameworks, it is easy to assume that this discipline specific research is not deemed valuable to the university, and should instead be left to the 'research' academics. Thus teaching focussed and teaching/research academics are forced to find a balance between their research interests and research requirements, while maintaining both job satisfaction and career progression opportunities. As a result of these challenges, it is essential that staff focusing on SoTL band together within this context and form a sub-discipline that nurtures progression in the area of SoTL. Williams et al. (2003) argue that to effectively integrate SoTL into higher education requires networks of scholars, rather than isolated individuals. The CoP approach, with a focus on social learning (Wenger, 2000), provides one means of engaging and up-skilling staff in SoTL.

In situating our CoP within the literature on SoTL communities of practice, it is important to distinguish between SoTL and scholarly teaching. The terms 'SoTL' and

'scholarly teaching' are sometimes used interchangeably, but represent qualitatively different concepts. Building from Boyer's (1990) original conceptualisation of the scholarship of teaching, SoTL has recently been defined as "the systematic study of teaching and learning, using established or validated criteria of scholarship, to understand how teaching (beliefs, behaviours, attitudes, and values) can maximize learning, and/or develop a more accurate understanding of learning, resulting in products that are publicly shared for critique and use by an appropriate community" (Potter & Kustra, 2011, p. 2). Further, the public sharing should be through peer-reviewed publications (Wilson-Doenges & Gurung, 2013). It is this focus on producing research outputs that are scrutinised by others (peer-review) that sets SoTL apart from scholarly teaching, where the focus is on "teaching grounded in critical reflection using systematically and strategically gathered evidence, related and explained by well-reasoned theory and philosophical understanding, with the goal of maximizing learning through effective teaching" (Potter & Kustra, 2011, p. 3). Further, divisions in relation to the quality of SoTL have been proposed. For example, Wilson-Doenges and Gurung (2013) identify three levels of SoTL research: entry-level SoTL with weaker designs, mid-level SOTL with some methodological shortcomings and high-level SOTL with rigorous methodology.

The majority of CoPs around SoTL featured in previous publications (e.g., Cox, 2013; Duffy, 2006) actually focus on scholarly approaches to teaching. Further, a survey across 86 learning communities (a type of structured higher education CoP that is typically focused on SoTL; Cox, 2013) indicated that while the majority were engaged in some form of scholarly teaching, only a minority reported publishing activity (Richlin & Cox, 2004). Previous research has identified multiple barriers in moving beyond scholarly teaching to engaging in SoTL research that results in peer-

reviewed publications. These include competing time demands and priorities; unfamiliarity with higher education literature, research methods and suitable journals for publishing; ethical challenges; and differences between disciplinary and SoTL practices (Hubball, Clarke, & Poole, 2010). Where SoTL CoPs have moved beyond scholarly teaching to engaging in teaching and learning research, mentorship of new CoP members by experienced SoTL researchers appears key. SoTL mentors are able to model SoTL practice, facilitate SoTL research and provide networking opportunities (Hubball et al., 2010). While mentorship provides one avenue for increasing SoTL research, there is a paucity of case studies available that examine how CoPs can work within the contested academic space to effectively engage members in SoTL in ways that result in recognised academic outputs. In this chapter, we present the evolution of our SoTL focussed CoP, which has developed capacity to achieve such outputs.

Research Approach

This research uses a case study design, based on the analysis of a Futures Workshop with CoP members. Futures Studies is a field within the social sciences that advocates the necessity and value of in-depth deconstruction of social issues. The argument is that the difficulty that can emerge in addressing social issues can come from failing to get to the root of an issue, and instead focussing on superficial and uncontested understandings of it. Within this field it is felt that by examining deeper cultural mythologies, worldviews, and value systems, the drivers of social issues can be identified. Knowing and addressing these drivers (as opposed to the resultant impact of these issues) gives opportunity for genuine long-term change to occur. A Futures Workshop is based on Causal Layered Analysis (CLA) methodology (Bishop & Dzidic, 2014; Inayatullah, 2006). The methodology is contextualist in its epistemology and presents as a useful analytical framework for the analysis of complex issues. The

complex issue that we wished to examine related to identifying and deconstructing the apparent resilience of a group, that by institutional definition, was not valued, and did not warrant support. A Futures Workshop aims to deconstruct a complex issue by prompting participants to explore it according to increasing levels of scrutiny. For example, questions posed at the beginning of a Futures Workshop can prompt participants to provide accounts of the uncontested history or qualities of the issue. In this instance, participants were asked to describe their history of participation in the group. The complexity of the questions then escalates, such that towards the end of the workshop, epistemological and ontological questions relating to the issue under investigation can be posed. For example, questions that call on participants to reflect on how others may socially construct the group, and what the underpinning of such constructions may be.

Conducting a Futures Workshop to deconstruct our CoP enabled an in-depth discussion of the dynamics of a group by its members. Tensions can emerge in instances that researchers are also embedded within the community they are investigating. The complexity arises whereby immersion in that community can inhibit the propensity for discoveries to be made and for thorough deconstruction to occur. The questioning style fostered in a Futures Workshop is one that forces participants to question underlying assumptions pertaining to the nature of the topic under investigation. The approach also recognises and values that researchers can perform dual roles, as traditional researchers engaging in a process of inquiry, but also as participants who have a contribution to make to the study.

Participants

In total, 11 members of the CoP participated in the Futures Workshop. Participants were from the same school, but represented two overarching disciplines

and at least six sub-disciplines. Participants represented a range of academic levels, from early career to 40 years within academia. All participants taught at either an undergraduate or postgraduate level within their discipline, however their allocation of teaching and research differed as per their appointment. Some participants had no research allocation but were permitted to engage in SoTL, others had upwards of 20 per cent research allocation and were permitted/expected to engage in discipline specific research. All but two participants identified as female, reflecting the composition of gender in the school.

Procedure

After this project was reviewed and approved by our local human research ethics committee, members of the CoP were invited to participate in a Futures Workshop facilitated by two of the authors (Dzidic and Castell). In the workshop, members were encouraged to discuss the history of the group (including external and internal factors that shaped its development), and reflect on its purpose, leadership and possible futures. The workshop was audio recorded and, after transcription and de-identification, the recording was securely erased. Following analysis, a feedback letter summarising key findings was presented to participants for comment. In reply, participants indicated that the summary captured their experiences of engaging in the CoP. In their feedback, some participants emphasised particular qualities of the CoP, or particular factors in the development of the CoP. This feedback has been integrated with, and has contributed to the depth and richness of, the analysis and interpretation of findings.

Analysis

The de-identified transcripts were analysed using CLA (Inayatullah, 1998, 2004), an emerging Futures methodology for examining data at four levels: the litany,

social causative, discourse/worldview and myth/metaphor. The aim of this approach is to deconstruct deeper, more complex underpinnings of social issues or processes. While akin to a thematic analysis in that the interpretation leads to the identification of themes, the process of analysis is informed by identifying data content pertaining to the conceptual layers. The layers assist in the identification of surface level themes (litany layer), as well as more complex systemic (social causes), discursive and ideological, and cultural and historical (myth/metaphor) themes. The interpretations and findings reflected in this chapter constitute the final phase of a CLA, where issues are synthesised and reconstructed to form meta-themes and messages. Our analysis draws on the community psychology concepts of barometers of change (Sarason, 2000), a critique of genuine participation (Arnstein, 1969; Taylor & Bogdan, 1980), and concepts of liberalism and neoliberalism (Newbrough, 1995) to understand the growth of membership, engagement, and resultant scholarly activity by CoP members over the first three years of operation.

Findings

Analysis of the Futures Workshop transcripts resulted in the identification of themes. For meaningful interpretation and ease of reading, these findings have been synthesised into three meta, or overarching themes of *systemic exclusion*, *contested institutional and group values*, and *changing constructions and undervaluing of academia* (see Table 1 for a summary). Despite the research group's institutional recognition, milestones, and success in challenging the systemic barriers that had prevented genuine participation and opportunity for the group, participants reported that the dominant cultural value and message that teaching research is not valued, prevailed. In this section, each theme is examined in depth with quotes used for illustration and justification.

Table 1

Summary of Themes Emerging from Causal Layered Analysis of Futures Workshop

Theme	Description
Systemic exclusion	• Individual and collective histories of engagement in CoP • Constructed as 'different' • Looking for a 'home' • Deprivation of resources • Collegiality through adversity
Contested institutional and group values	• Hierarchy in perceived value of roles and activities • 'Core business' • Operating within dominant university culture • Accessing esteem without compromising group values
Changing constructions and under-valuing of academia	• Notions of an 'academic' • Contrasting a 'bygone' era with contemporary notions of academia • Garnering opportunities to engage meaningfully in one's role as an 'academic'

Systemic Exclusion

Participants were invited to reflect on their personal history of engagement as a member of the research group. Given the gradual growth in membership, accounts of the history were diverse. Some participants were founding members and reflected on the beginnings of the group out of an institution-wide push to create formalised research groups. Others had joined more recently, as new staff members, and/or due to mutual research interests and opportunities for collaboration. Despite diversity in stories, a collective chronological account emerged and was met with consensus. Notably,

irrespective of the duration of engagement in the group, some participants lamented that they did not qualify for membership in other research gruops, felt 'different', as 'other', and as 'under valued'. Specifically, participants described their experience of being excluded from the wider research community but had "*found a home*" as a member of the research group. Founding members reflected on the emergence of the research groups more broadly within the university, and what this meant for them. A participant stated:

> *I can remember that scramble when the faculty decided that it was gonna have these research groups and people had to be aligned with them and there were all sorts of rules about who could and couldn't join each group and everything else. …it was imposed now in the school and as we said, there was a kind of this group of elite – the faculty was realigning itself, I think, as wanting to focus almost exclusively on health-related research. And there were people like myself who were thinking 'well, I don't really give a toss about health'.*

Here, the participant reflected on top-down decision making processes and suggested that a particular domain of research (health) was valued more than others. With restructuring came the expectation that academics' research interests and expertise should align with the faculty's current interest. Participants further deconstructed and critiqued the imposed processes and character of the group membership, stating:

> *Participant A: but if you were a level two [a grading system that identified group members on their level of experience and power afforded to them as members], there were things you weren't allowed to do, and it was just like this whole hierarchical thing.*
>
> *Participant B: it's very much like a class system, almost instantly.*

Participant A: You're right. That validated [you] as a researcher or not.

For participants who were afforded the opportunity to join health related research groups, the hierarchical class structure was off-putting, acting as a deterrent for future engagement. Other participants found themselves allocated to a group that appeared to fall out of the valued research domain, a participant reflected:

> *...the faculty had programs of research and they decided to sort of replicate it within the school to get collaboration going within the school. So they were able to map out all the other areas and they then they had a few people left over.*

Being constructed as 'left overs' was a sentiment echoed by other participants, for example, *"so it did seem very much that it was the odd bods, that was people who didn't fit into the existing programs of research"*. In response to these systemic pressures, the group initially self-identified and labeled itself as the 'Odd Bods'. The name represented a collective experience of exclusion, being constructed as different, and a sense that the value of their disciplinary expertise and contribution was undermined and not appreciated by the school or faculty.

Participants also discussed the transformation of the research group from the 'Odd Bods' to a collectively determined nomenclature and formally identified research group. Participants noted that over time the group identified systemic barriers that prevented a presence and voice in decision-making and opportunities experienced by other research groups and individual researchers. As discrepancies were identified, the research group systemically challenged dominant cultural values pertaining to the value, role and contribution of teaching and learning research. A major issue that the research group contended with was systemic oppression, a participant noted:

> *...I remember one of the things that we kept pushing for was to be recognised as researcher, as a research group, because every time research was mentioned*

> *in staff meetings, we were always left off… It was more about accessing resources because if you're not recognised as a research group, then you can't apply for the school research grants. You can't – you gotta get recognised in your workload.*

Another participant stated:

> *…I think when we realised that this was the only group that didn't have representation on the R&D committee, it was – I mean it was described at the time as being 'an oversight'…*

Deliberate or otherwise, the exclusion described in the two previous accounts illuminated a perceived difference between the CoP and other research groups and researchers within the school. This introduced unique procedural challenges that other research groups (aligned with faculty programs of research) had not endured.

Institutional and Group Values in Contest

Participants explored and contested dominant university culture and values, arguing that the culture resulted in a class system that privileged some academics and excluded others. A competitive academic climate was identified that valued particular research (that aligned with faculty programs of research) over teaching related research. Further, participants criticised the more general institutional culture that valued research over teaching. For example, a participant stated, *"…I still think that anything to do with teaching is considered to have no value",* and another, *"It's an interesting idea that if you're doing teaching, it must be because you couldn't get a research position… but that's not the case"*.

This hierarchy in perceived value of roles and activities resonated with participants who tended to either empathise with or identify as performing a role outside

those valued and celebrated within the university. The potential impact this current value system has on future academics was lamented during the workshop,

> *A big legacy of the group would be that young people starting out don't see teaching as – or a teaching focussed role as a consolation prize. …that it's just considered a career path the same way as any other role.*

Following this, a participant responded, *"and maybe a booby prize for some people. I mean, that sounds weird, not even a consolation prize, but a booby prize".*

Having emerged as a research group in part out of adversity and being constructed as 'outsiders', the culture of the research group aligned itself with values of inclusion and agency. For example, one participant reflected on the group's response to the broader dominant university culture, stating, *"…the humour, the irreverence of it all; the acknowledgement of the teaching as core business of the university".* Here, the roles of group members are valued as being "*core business*", as opposed to being undervalued and positioned on the periphery. The imposition of hierarchical and value laden processes and structures was also critiqued by participants, for example,

> *I think that seems to be a pattern over the years is that anything that's imposed will fail at some point. Anything where people are allowed to let their creativity and their individual thing grow will mean it will work.*

Membership within the research group created a 'safe' place for exploration, learning, development, advocacy, capacity building, collaboration and mentorship. One participant reflected on the group's collective endeavors to garner agency and autonomy, perceiving these efforts as illustrative of "*self-empowerment*",

> *[This group is a] really classic example of empowerment or self-empowerment. I mean really, it's the nature of the group has been in fact, it's been supportive, non-competitive, but still effective, and I think the group support was provided*

> *for people to actually do their own thing and feel protected… So they're not gonna be penalised for being who they are and I think that's allowed the growth of the group.*

It was also evident that the research group was empathic to the lived experience of its members, for example,

> *I think just that common understanding of what it's actually like to be teaching on the ground, because I think it's very easy when you have teaching in your workload to become very insular because you've just got to put your head down and write this lecture or mark these six billion assignments or whatever. And I find that I feel very disconnected from everybody at my peak times of the year. But this gives a sense of, you know, at least I know I'm gonna see people once every couple of weeks.*

The emergence of the research group as a CoP is perhaps a product of members contesting the broader exclusionary and hierarchical culture of the institution in which they are embedded. Participants recognised their values and practices fell outside of those recognised and legitimised by the university. For example, it was evident that to be aligned with the qualities praised by the university would require participants adopting the university's values at the expense of their own. Absolving values presents as inherently unjust and, irrespective of the injustice, the adoption of alternative roles (including those roles valued by the university) presents to participants as an impossibility. Some participants were structurally bound by their appointment and contractually inhibited from engaging in research outside of SoTL.

The Changing Value of 'Academia'

Participants reflected on the perceived value of academia, reflecting on changes in common understandings around what being an 'academic' means, and how conceptualisations of academia have changed over time. One participant stated:

> *I can remember a time when [the University] had the reputation of being an applied university and that we had a distinct marketable brand… about actually developing theory in application and that seemed to me to be – yeah – something that attracted students… good students who came here because they really wanted to do things…*

Here the participant lamented on the changing nature of both the institution and of academic pursuit, making an explicit connection between teaching style and student expectations and perceptions. The notion of a 'bygone' era where students "*really wanted to do things*" was paralleled in CoP members' reflections on the value of the group for promoting opportunities to conduct research, hold conversations and collaboratively engage in ways which were perceived as personally and professionally meaningful or "*actually important*".

Notions of what could be valued as "*actually important*" among CoP members were contrasted with broader commentary on the nature of academia and perceptions regarding the "*core business*" of the university. For example, one participant reflected that, "*…teaching and learning research is always disregarded. And I suspect that people still don't necessarily think of us as being a research group".* Participants' reflections on a changing academic climate, that teaches differently and fails to recognise SoTL as research, suggested that participants located themselves as individuals and a collective within a dominant socio-cultural context.

Participants recognised that there were sections within the university who questioned the legitimacy of the group, a sentiment that group members contested with

conviction. For example, one participant commented on how the research group was able to succeed despite structural impositions, stating, *"we had these research groups imposed on us and we made it work... it's possible to kind of do your own thing a bit underneath the radar"*. The metaphor of 'flying under the radar' was pervasive, and reflected other 'war' metaphors adopted by participants during the workshop. Words such as "*battle*", "*fight*", "*underdog*", "*challenge*" and "*win*", were symbolic of the ostracism and threat participants experienced in the broader competitive cultural context of the university. For example,

> *It's like you have to fight and it seems like this has been safety in numbers. So there's like, I suppose, awareness of the systemic things that we have to fight for. And that this is an avenue [through] which we can, I suppose, work within the system to kind of break the system down and get what we want from it*.

Participants reflected on engaging in the "*fight*", to challenging existing policies so to be afforded the same access and opportunities as other research groups. A discursive shift within the school and faculty recognising the group's work as 'research' (a valued construct), as opposed to teaching 'scholarship' (a trivialised construct) afforded the research group new rights, previously only experienced by other research groups. The research group drew links between achieving recognition as 'researchers' with significant milestones in their development, namely; membership in decision-making circles (e.g., the school research and development committee), access to resources (e.g., conference support), competitive research funding success, significant publication outputs, and growth and stability in research group membership (see Table 2). For CoP members, attainment of these resources and access to esteem within the university context were symbolic of a shifting perception of the group, from 'Odd Bods' to a legitimate research group. Legitimation of the group has been an ongoing process.

It is apparent that using the metrics of success adopted by already legitimate research groups has meant that the CoP has indisputable evidence of its success. In doing so, the CoP has in effect 'played the game'; they have conformed to what is valued by the broader institution, but have done so in a way that they have been able to garner control of their subject matter.

Table 2

Group Size and Key Objective Performance Indicators From 2012 to 2014

	2012	2013	2014
Members	6	15	17
Peer reviewed publications	2	10	10
Conference presentations	5	4	18
Research funding (AU$)	12,000	259,000	140,500

Note. The 2013 funding figure includes two nationally competitive grants. In the first two months of 2015 (to February 28), there have been three papers published (and another five accepted), six conference presentations (and another five accepted) and AU$50,000 in funding earned.

Participants reflected on the advantages that came with being recognised as a *legitimate* research group. Participants derived a sense of legitimacy from the research group being identified as an exemplar, and as leaders in teaching research at a faculty and university level. For example, one participant reflected,

> *I think we're recognised in the faculty as leading the teaching research in the faculty. And the faculty is seen as leading teaching research in the university. So that puts us right at the forefront of it.*

Another stated,

It [the research group] also maybe raised the profile of the school in a way … from the faculty's perspective; I think we've kind of done the whole school a favour in the sense

of them [the faculty] kind of giving us a tick for what we're doing.

Reflections on the CoP

The aim of this chapter was to present the evolution and current status of the CoP, in part to serve as an exemplar of how CoPs in a research-intensive higher education setting can develop. On reflection, it could be argued that this CoP is perhaps 'non-replicable' in that the group emerged out of adversity; individuals found themselves in an exclusionary social context that valued a particular type of academic over another. These 'Odd Bods' found each other and autonomy through endeavouring to work outside of a system that labelled them as different and valued them less. To propose a template, or set of parameters to replicate the success of the research group as a CoP is perhaps antithetical given that it was the imposition of pre-determined rules, structures, and processes that lead to group members finding themselves excluded. To offer rules and structures potentially replicates the system and processes criticised by the group in the first place.

Despite this paradox, we argue that much can be learnt from the emergence of the group. Rather than solely 'looking in' at the specific dynamics and processes of the group, there is necessity to 'look out' and examine the social and historical context that the group emerged from and is now embedded within. This claim is well supported given themes from the workshop analysis reflect issues surrounding autonomy and exclusion, and is consistent with the contextualist and systemic focus promoted by the use of CLA. We suggest that for 'successful' CoPs in research-intensive higher education settings to emerge, there is a need for a supportive, safe and inclusive context. Indeed, these characteristics are commonly cited as instrumental to the development of successful CoPs (e.g., McDonald & Star, 2008; Nagy & Burch, 2009; Ng & Pemberton,

2013). In this chapter, we offer a deconstruction of the context that gave rise to this successful CoP.

In the following sections, we reflect and build on the themes and messages that emerged from the Futures Workshop. We present these reflections according to qualities or parameters that may 'typically' be considered when establishing a CoP. In doing so, we offer alternative 'parameters' for consideration of a successful CoP. When considering *Leadership* and *Lifecycle* we offer *History, Context and Structural Considerations*, when considering *Planning* we offer *Engagement*, and, when considering *Processes, Protocols and Tools for Success*, we offer *Foundations*. In our offerings, we endeavour to deconstruct and question the presumptions of what makes for a successful CoP. We do this by not only 'looking in' at the qualities of the group but also by 'looking out'; examining the context and history that lead to the group's emergence. What appears to make the CoP somewhat unique is its struggle for legitimacy within the institution. It thus makes sense to explore institutional ideology.

History, Context and Structural Considerations

The research group's structure as a CoP emerged somewhat organically, in the sense that the dynamics emerged out of necessity. It was obvious to the group members that the way in which they would receive the necessary support as academics was through supporting each other. As such, the CoP was not a deliberate attempt to give name or structure to the research group. Rather, it presented as an unsaid operationalisation of a research groups' response to a challenging academic context.

Participants' personal and collective struggles within the dominant university culture appeared to have prompted members to construct a social setting that protects its members; allowing for personal and collective needs to be met. In contest with participants' experiences within the broader university context, where participants'

experiences reflected being afforded little agency or control, the structure of the research group is negotiated and responsive to the needs of its members. While there are leadership roles in the group, the leadership is constructed as more of a 'facilitator' role, convened by two members (as opposed to a single member) of the group. Conveners have tended to change annually, with regular changes motivated by a desire to enable up-skilling and experiential learning for other members of the group. Regular fortnightly meetings are scheduled, however attendance is encouraged rather than enforced. This is in recognition of the practical constraints experienced by teaching staff, and an understanding that there will be periods during the year which are particularly time demanding. Standing items on the agenda are negotiated so as to be responsive to the needs and direction of the group.

As such, a quality of the research group that appears to have strengthened its effectiveness is its collective fight for agency and creative control, within the broader institutional context. By fighting for power, the group has been able to co-construct its format, focus, and overall, its identity. Arnstein (1969) presents a 'ladder' of participation as a typological framework for understanding how different forms of participation grant access to power, resources and opportunities for change. At the higher rungs of the ladder, Arnstein suggests that citizens engage in renegotiation of power, and actively shape the nature of their participation. This process of renegotiation sees those who are not in a position of power afforded power, and, those in a position of power, resign some of theirs. At the lower rungs of the ladder, citizen participation is tokenistic, reflecting coercive processes and disempowerment. We speculate that the dynamics evident within the CoP might reflect participation as it pertains to the higher rungs of the ladder. Participation is characterised by empowerment. The kind of power held within/by the group has not been gifted. or afforded to them. Rather has come as

a consequence of the group actively rejecting the rules, structures and processes imposed on them.

CoP Engagement

The formation of the research group was iterative, organic and in response to systemic barriers preventing its members from engaging meaningfully in other research groups. In response, one of the foundational values of the group is *inclusivity.* This value marks a rejection of intellectual elitism and celebrates engagement between group members, irrespective of their status, experience within academia, or disciplinary background. The specific nature of engagement is multifaceted and reflected in the research group's interpersonal style, flexibility (through empathy), and multidisciplinary focus.

The *interpersonal style* between members is one based on mutual respect and support, and is responsive to group members' diverse needs (e.g., appointment, academic experience etc.). There is a desire in the group for meetings to be a space where participants can engage in meaningful research or teaching related discussions, and a forum to ask questions or seek advice. Importantly, all questions are taken seriously and are valued equally. This mindset appears to have fostered a safe, value-free setting that encourages inquiry and the exchange of information and knowledge.

The group dynamic is characterised by its *flexibility (through empathy).* There is an appreciation within the group that the demands of teaching place legitimate pressures on group members, and that there are times in the academic calendar where research may present as a competing demand to teaching. Given this, levels of engagement in the research group can fluctuate. Importantly, this fluctuation is *accepted without penalty* and, arguably, has contributed to the longevity and robust nature of the research group.

The group has adopted a *multidisciplinary focus*, and while not all research projects are necessarily multidisciplinary in nature, diverse disciplinary perspectives shape group discussions. Multidisciplinary collaboration within the group has fostered not only creativity, but also methodologically and statistically robust research projects that have substantive applicability. Adopting a multidisciplinary orientation has therefore helped to build capacity.

Collectively, these qualities in the engagement style help to create, as termed by participants, a *"home"* for group members; presenting as qualities enabling both personal and collective self-determination and autonomy.

CoP Foundations

It is perhaps tempting to identify processes, protocols and tools that promote and support the development and sustainability of a CoP. However, it would seem that these qualities are rendered meaningless unless a 'level playing field' exists. A level playing field within the context of this chapter refers to assurances that systemic and ideological factors do not result in favouritism or privileges being afforded to one research group and not another. When the playing field is not level, process, protocols and the adoption of tools that are common practice for one group can be an impossibility for another. It may be impossible because a group is not aware of opportunities. If they are aware, they may be precluded from engaging through mechanisms such as policy, value-laden rhetoric or labeling, or, are disempowered to the extent that efforts at resistance are perceived as too great, or deemed to be too risky or damaging. A level playing field did not exist when the research group was conceived, and it can be argued that it was these inequities, seen through systemic exclusion and deprivation of resources and opportunities, that prompted the subsequent development of the group. It is important to note, however, that while the playing field external to the group could

not be considered 'level', internally, within the research group, the playing field was characterised by equity and inclusion.

Determining if the playing field is level requires examining the broader social and cultural context for evidence that a CoP has access to the resources and opportunities that *should* be afforded it. This serves as a necessary *foundation* for a CoP. Across various stages of the research group's development, members became aware of inequities, and were active in contesting and challenging these barriers to their success. Participants reflected upon indicators of changing perceptions toward the research group, noting *"...I think we're winning if, when we open our mouths at a meeting, people roll their eyes.*" Here, the participant reflected that disrupting the status quo is indicative of their success as a research group, and is evidence that perceptions of the research group as a legitimate presence have taken hold. This is evidence that the group now has a voice, because they are being heard.

Achieving legitimacy in this group did not come from achieving 'esteem' as a research group in ways that are applied to other research groups within the university. Rather, indicators of having achieved legitimacy as a group were reflected in instances where the group achieved notoriety in their capacity to effect change at school and faculty levels, for example, via having a presence at meetings, exercising a voice and influence, and forging opportunities to command resources. Sarason's (2000) barometers of change theory refers to the identification of nuances in hindsight that are indicative of change. For the CoP, achieving legitimacy over time is seen through these aforementioned barometers. These barometers appear illustrative of the fact that the group is still an outsider within the dominant university culture and value system. The appraisal of success is not through conventional measures, but instead reflected in

indicators that the group does not conform. That is, they remain the perpetual 'Odd Bods'.

It can be argued that it was the members' determination and fighting spirit that lead to changes in policy and resource access. However, it was also the group's collective agency. Unlike individual efforts at resistance that may result in heightened vulnerability, collective resistance has greater propensity to offer protection through numbers and also capacity building through sharing of knowledge.

Conclusions, Final Reflections, Implications and Future Plans

In contrast to many SoTL CoPs with 'imposed' membership and institutional support, such as faculty learning communities (e.g., Cox, 2013; Richlin & Cox, 2004), our group experienced organic growth. It is apparent that our individual and collective experiences of exclusion and othering prompted a movement of defiance; collective endeavours have not only made a home for a group of 'Odd Bods' but have resulted in significant personal, institutional and social contributions.

Our SoTL CoP is successfully overcoming the previously identified barriers in moving beyond scholarly teaching to engaging in SoTL research that results in peer-reviewed publications (Hubball et al., 2010). Our CoP operated as a social learning system (Wenger, 2000; 2010) with group members sharing practice and expertise, resulting in a demonstrable increase in SoTL related grants, peer-reviewed publications and conference papers over the preceding three years. With a focus on outputs, our SoTL CoP on the surface mirrors some of the previously identified values specific to higher education research based CoPs: responding to research pressure and intellectual isolation through moving towards collaborative research with a focus on tangible returns (Ng & Pemberton, 2013). However, while these outputs might be considered indicators of a successful CoP using traditional measures of success, it is valuable to

deconstruct those indicators of change that gave rise to the contexts, and opportunities, in which our group as a successful CoP could flourish (Sarason, 2000).

The experiences of the research group as a CoP reflect a tension between the values of its members and that of its institutional setting. However, the root causes of these value tensions extend far beyond the physical university setting and rather, are a reflection of broader changes in dominant socio-economic ideology and governmentality within Australia. Under neoliberalism, it is not surprising that the traditional notions and values of education have undergone transformation, whereby notions of learning, enquiry, and the pursuit of knowledge have been challenged. It is similarly unsurprising that under neoliberalism, top-down decision making processes valuing hierarchy and control are deemed appropriate strategies for re-structuring. (Indeed, the perceived value and utility in re-structuring is, in itself, reflective of neoliberalism.)

Specific qualities that distinguish liberal (the former ideology) and neo-liberal orientations (a contemporary ideology) with higher education settings are posited in Table 3.

Table 3

Qualities of Liberal and Neoliberal Governmentality in Higher Education

Qualities	Liberal (traditional)	Neoliberal (emergent)
Governance	Collegial, flat, negotiated	Competitive, hierarchical, dominated
Restructuring	Professional autonomy	Determination of 'which' professional autonomy

Power and agency	The right and freedom for academics to define their role	Rights and freedom of academics are dependent on markets

Note. Adapted from Olssen and Peters (2007)

On reflection, neoliberal conceptualisation of governance, constructs of power and agency, and the emphasis on restructuring, offer socio-political terms to explain the challenges experienced by members of the CoP during its development. However, such threats to autonomy through the "commodification of teaching and research" (Olssen & Peters, 2007, p. 316) resonate with the experiences we, the CoP members *continue* to experience in our day-to-day lives as academics. Neoliberalist regulation within higher education manifests to create settings whereby "targets and performance criteria are increasingly applied from *outside* the academic role that diminish the sense in which the academic – their teaching and research – are autonomous" (Olssen & Peters, 2007, p. 326). Through academic restructuring, our roles (through the distribution of either teaching or research dominant roles), and research practices (through the formation of programs of research) have been determined *for* us. Outside determination of roles (title) and performance of that role (duties, tasks) have deprived us of professional autonomy (Olssen & Peters, 2007).

Neoliberalism within the higher education system is expected to result in greater productivity, the same outcome expected of the more traditional market economy. However, from a neoliberalist perspective, productivity is fostered through competition. Marginson (1997; cited in Olssen & Peters, 2005) gives commentary on the cultural shifts within Australian universities observed to accompany higher education reform. Of particular note,

> The removal from collegial view of key decisions regarding governance…. The creation of limited life areas of research or research centres, sponsored from above for research funding purposes…. Research management is subject to homogenizing systems for assessing performance…. A diminishment of the role of peer input into decisions about research. (p.327).

While it could be argued that these qualities identified by Marginson (1997) are conducive to competition, these qualities also depict the rhetorical, reactionary and individualistic demands placed on academics under this system of governance.

Within a broader social and cultural context that celebrates competition over more collegial academic pursuits, and favours organisational control over autonomy, CoPs perhaps serve as a 'safe haven' for those within higher education settings who find themselves excluded, othered and deprived of personal agency and autonomy. Put simply, a neoliberal context does little to create a supportive and inclusive context. Rather, as was experienced by the 'Odd-Bods', this position has the propensity to ostracise and stifle productivity. That was until the 'Odd-Bods' found sufficient collective agency to challenge the system. Rittel and Webber (1973) reflect:

…planning for large social systems has proved to be impossible without loss of liberty and equity. Hence, for them the ultimate goal of planning should be anarchy, because it should aim at the elimination of government over others…" (p. 158). It is speculated that the success of CoP has come as a result of overt engagement in a metaphorical perpetual 'battle' to disrupt and challenge the dominant neoliberal context.

Taylor and Bogdan's (1980) work on 'defending the illusion of the institution' provides a commentary on the governing capacity of broad systemic structures. The authors note that scope for action, participation and engagement among citizens is perpetually governed by broad systems and structures. The 'illusion' to which Taylor

and Bogdan refer is the capacity for institutions to shape-shift at a surface level, while still operating under the same legitimating myths which established conditions for non-participation, exclusion and disempowerment in the first place. Institutions will make use of devices that are cloaked in the rhetoric of supporting citizen engagement, empowerment and action. However, these devices merely serve to sustain prevailing power distances and structures. The processes therefore are deceptive and manipulative as changes give a false impression of institutional improvement. In the case of this CoP, we may speculate that it emerged in response to similar rhetorical devices (e.g., new categories of employment for academic staff and the formation of programs of research). It is apparent that the group members have actively contested the apparent systemic changes to achieve individual and collective gains, which are considered meaningful for those who form the CoP.

Newbrough (1995) similarly theorises the tensions between liberty (the self) and equality (justice), but does so with the added dimension of fraternity (the collective). It is perhaps through Newbrough's theorising that we can garner the greatest insights regarding COP. That is, a COP is indeed a *community*, and the sole pursuit of liberty over fraternity has the unintended propensity to stifle creativity, agency, a connection with others, and quite possibly productivity. Ultimately, we speculate that it is not possible to set about to 'create' a successful CoP. Rather, perhaps it is the case that a CoP appears to develop its strength and success through a solid foundation. In this particular instance, the foundation was a shared experience of adversity, and the desire to make an, at times, adverse social setting amenable to the interests of group members. Specifically, the CoP used the metrics and processes imposed on them as a means of legitimising the SoTL research they felt was undervalued within the broader university context. It is undisputable that the outputs generated by the groups have been

successful, and this seemingly provides leeway for the group to continue to engage in research not considered 'in vogue'. In summary, we argue that this CoP has been successful because it has been able to work within the constraints of a neoliberal tertiary education sector. However, the success of a CoP is not determined by tangible outputs alone. Rather, it is characterised by equity, collaboration, genuine participation and empowerment among all members to meet the individual and collective aims of the group.

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